

## **Hospitality and Covenant Faithfulness**

*Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast*

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### **Genesis 17:1-8** NRSV / CEB

*Promises, promises, promises. In a word, that was God's covenant with Abraham. Abraham would enjoy a special relationship with God. Abraham would have countless descendants. Abraham would be a source of blessing for the whole world. On the way, God would keep an eye on Abraham and protect him.*

Abram was ninety-nine years old, when the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty. Walk with me. Be trustworthy. I will make a covenant between us. And I will give you many, many descendants." Abram fell on his face.

And God said to him, "As for me, my covenant is with you. You will be the ancestor of many nations. And because I have made you the ancestor of many nations, your name will no longer be Abram but Abraham. I will make you very fruitful. I will produce nations from you. And kings will come from you. I will set up my covenant with you and your descendants after you in every generation as an enduring covenant. I will be your God and your descendants' God after you. I will give you and your descendants the land in which you are immigrants, the whole land of Canaan, as an enduring possession. And I will be their God."

### **Galatians 3:6-9**

*In the early years of the Christian church, there was strong pressure on Gentile Christians that they should observe parts, at least, of the covenant law that God had given Israel through Moses. The Apostle Paul rejected this pressure. He urged Gentile Christians to see themselves within an older and more foundational covenant, not with Israel, but with Abraham, a covenant characterized not by law, but by faith.*

Just as Abraham "believed God, and it was looked upon as righteousness," you should know that it's those who believe who are Abraham's descendants. Scripture, seeing in advance that God would declare the Gentiles righteous by believing, announced the good news to Abraham in advance: "All the nations will be blessed through you." And so those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed.

## Sermon

Hospitality is a good thing. We all know that. Hospitality is about receiving and treating guests in a warm and generous way. You know, inviting people over for dinner once in a while. And when people do come, not hurrying them out the door.

**BUT THERE WAS MORE TO HOSPITALITY** in the ancient Near East. Hospitality wasn't just a good thing, it was a necessary thing. And there was an unwritten code of expectations. If you welcomed a guest under your roof, you provided a place to rest. Because there was nowhere else to stay. If you welcomed a guest under your roof, you provided food and drink. Because there was nowhere else to eat. And if you welcomed a guest under your roof, you provided safety. Because it was a dangerous world.

These expectations linger even in our own day. A few years ago, a reporter for *National Geographic* magazine visited the rough and unstable region on the border between Chechnya and Georgia. She was welcomed as a guest in a small village. That counted for a lot in such a dangerous place. Her host reassured her. If trouble were to come, she would be the last person to die. Everyone in the village would protect her, because she was a guest.

Hospitality matters, especially in a dangerous world. At Adult Ed last Sunday night, Gayle told us how hospitality figures in some familiar and unfamiliar Old Testament stories. The problem in Sodom, for example, was a collapse of hospitality. In Sodom, guests were as likely to be victimized as to be warmly received. That's what happened with Lot's two visitors (cp. Genesis 19:1-11). A failure of hospitality on this scale was a gross violation of the common expectations of ancient near eastern culture. And . . . Well, we know what happened to Sodom.

**OF COURSE, HOSPITALITY ISN'T JUST** between people. The most generous host of all is God. As I pointed out a couple of Sundays ago, the biblical creation stories are partly about God's hospitality. Whatever the mechanisms, God has created a wonderful world. And whatever the mechanisms, God has welcomed all sorts of creatures to make themselves at home in that world. More than that, God has welcomed human beings not only to be at home, but also to be partners with God in the work of making that home as good as it can be.

There is a problem, however. Hospitality is a good thing. But hospitality has its limits. The ancient near eastern tradition required you to provide hospitality for as long as a guest was under your roof. But guests can wear out their welcome.

Years ago, there was a sketch on *Saturday Night Live* called "The thing that wouldn't leave!" My memory of the sketch is sketchy. But, as I recall, it featured a guest who came for a party then wouldn't go home. No matter what the hosts did to encourage him out the door, he wouldn't take the hint. The sketch was funny because we all recognized the problem. We all knew that hospitality has its limits.

**IT APPEARS FROM SOME BIBLICAL STORIES** that God's hospitality also has its limits. And we get that. We have no problem imagining how someone's hospitality, even God's, can be exhausted. Guests who overstay their welcome. Guests who don't pick up after themselves. Guests who eat you out of house and home. Guests who come in noisy and late. And so on. That's when you say, "Enough! Get out!" That's the way it is in our culture anyway. In fact, in our culture, if we don't send bad company packing, people will tell us that we're only enabling them to make a mess out of their own lives and out of other people's lives.

Something like that appears to be going on in the biblical story of the Great Flood. In that story, God's guests are trashing the place; they're rearranging furniture; they're knocking down walls – walls that turn out to be load-bearing walls! It's all too much. God's hospitality runs out. And God pulls the house down with everyone, almost everyone, inside. Hospitality – even divine hospitality – has its limits.

That's an uncomfortable position for human beings to be in: to depend on God's hospitality, but to know that God's hospitality has its limits, and to know that we always make a mess out of the place. We blanket cities with smog. We set rivers on fire. We soak the earth with blood. We don't stand a chance! How can we not wear out God's hospitality? How can we avoid cities collapsing on our heads and walls of water washing us away? We're doomed!

But what if God were to make a promise? What if God were to say, "I will welcome you and I will continue to be your host forever"?

**GOD MADE A COVENANT** with Abraham. God made promises to Abraham. "I will bless you and your descendants. I will provide a home for you. I will protect you. I will be your God, and I will be the God of your descendants. In other words, I will shelter you, I will provide for you, and I will protect you. And these promises have no limit. My hospitality will not run out."

The rest of the biblical story is about God keeping the covenant promises made to Abraham. The story of Joseph is a story of God's faithfulness to Abraham and his descendants. The story of Moses and the Law is a story of God's faithfulness to Abraham and his descendants. The story of David is a story of God's faithfulness to Abraham and his descendants. And the story of Jesus Christ is a story, the climactic story, of God's faithfulness to Abraham and his descendants.

It's all about the covenant with Abraham, a covenant made by God to embrace all of Abraham's descendants. The covenant God made at Sinai with Moses and Israel when he gave Israel the Law, the covenant God made with David when he promised him an everlasting kingdom – those particular covenants were made within the broader covenant with Abraham. The covenant with Abraham is the foundation.

**THAT'S WHY THE APOSTLE PAUL** is at pains to make it clear as can be to Gentile Christians that they are not members of Israel, that they are not obliged to keep the Law of Moses. No. They are not members of the covenant God made with Israel. They are members of the foundational covenant, the covenant God made with Abraham.

It's a question not of genealogy. It's a question not of circumcision or dietary restrictions or Sabbath-keeping. It's a question of faith, of believing and trusting what God has said. Abraham had faith. He believed what God told him. He trusted what God told him.

All these years later, thousands of years later, membership in the covenant God made with Abraham is a question of faith. It's especially a question of believing and trusting what God has said through his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is the Word of God, the living Word of God, made flesh. Everyone who believes and trusts what God has said through Jesus Christ is a descendant of Abraham. And all of them, with their households, are members of God's covenant with Abraham.

And it's a covenant of promises, the promises of hospitality, to welcome, to shelter, to provide, to protect; promises to provide a lasting home. We cling to those promises. And we are blessed, blessed along with Abraham, who also believed.

**NOW HERE'S SOMETHING IMPORTANT.** Yes, God has welcomed us. Yes, God provides for us. Yes, God protects us. And yes, God's promise is enduring. God is not going to change his mind. God's hospitality is not going to run out.

However, that doesn't mean we're free to wreck the place! That doesn't mean we can rearrange the furniture any way we want. That doesn't mean we can burn up all the firewood in a weekend. That doesn't mean we get to throw people out of the house. That doesn't mean we can behave badly. Because we are guests.

It's God's house. It's God's kingdom. We live and move by God's patience and by God's pleasure. And the only thing to do, the only right and good thing to do, is for us to take care of the place God has made our home, and to take care of all its creatures: birds of the air, fish of the sea, wild animals. (And I don't imagine those wild animals are meant for a backyard menagerie in Ohio, but instead to roam Himalayan plateaus and African savannas.)

Now it probably goes without saying – at least without saying to people who have been paying any attention at all. It probably goes without saying, but our best efforts at being civilized guests – our best efforts fall short again and again. We certainly do try the patience of our most generous Host. But God is good. God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in covenant faithfulness. God keeps his word. God keeps covenant forever. And we are welcomed. And we are saved. Thanks be to God!